

Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020

David Lose, formerly at Luther Seminary, reminds us that Lent isn't very popular in the culture. It isn't Christmas, where there are presents to receive and family get-togethers. It's not the 4th of July, with barbeques and patriotic pride and parades.

We don't cross days off on a calendar until Ash Wednesday shows up. In fact, I wish the chocolate fountain of Shrove Tuesday could go on for a while longer! We don't have children asking us, How many more days until we receive the ashes on our foreheads?

And what words do we associate with Lent? Repentance. Contemplation. Discipline. Those are pretty hard to market. No wonder this church season hasn't caught on in the culture like Christmas. So who needs Lent? Well, maybe we do. We need 40 days to refocus, to get our minds and hearts wrapped around something other than our busy schedules.

A pastor by the name of Janet Hunt tells the story of her nephew coming to her one Saturday morning when she was at his house. Her nephew was three at the time, and his mother was busy. So he came up to his aunt and asked for a carrot.

She figured she could handle this, so she went to the crisper, pulled out a carrot, and peeled it. And while he stood and waited, she asked him if he wanted her to cut it in half. She thought she understood him to say yes, so she cut it in half, and handed the two pieces to him. But apparently she had misunderstood, because he began to sob, and wail: Fix it. Fix it.

She says, It was no time for reasoning. I simply started over. I went and got another carrot and washed and peeled it and handed it to him whole. Her nephew forgot about it and went to watch Saturday morning cartoons, but she remembered the time he asked her to fix something that she knew she would not be able to fix, she would not be able to put back together. She did the next best thing, which was to start over.

And then she wondered, How often do we not understand each other? How often do we fail each other? How often do we break each other's hearts because of what we say or do or fail to say or do?

So here we are at another Ash Wednesday, and we remember the relationships we have broken this past year, intentionally or not. We recall the things that we tried to make right, but we couldn't. We are reminded by the ashes how frail we are and how so many things are simply out of our hands. But we also remember that through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God is putting the world back together in love and mercy.

You won't find the word Lent in the Bible. It's a tradition that grew out of the experience of Christians a little later in the church's life. By the end of the fourth century, a forty-day period was set aside in the church year to give us some wilderness time, some time to listen, some time to look inside, forty days to battle those thoughts, words and deeds that lead us away from God's best for us, forty days of spiritual training.

The word Lent comes from an old-English word for lengthen, because it happens when Spring is on the way, when the days lengthen- but we can also think of Lent as a springtime for the soul. One of the traditions of Lent is to give up something dear to us, to develop some discipline, to trust less in the comforts of this life, and more in the power of God.

I picked up something from a pastor online about not only putting something down for Lent but also taking something up. Here's what he suggests. "Take up something for Lent: We give things up to make room to take things up. Give up something that is getting in the way of your relationship with God. Give up something that is getting in the way of the Kingdom.

Give up chocolate. Give up chocolate that is made on the backs of the working poor. Give up chocolate that enslaves children and puts them in dangerous working conditions. Give up Hershey, (and Nestles, and Mars). And take up Fair-Trade chocolate.

Give up Facebook. And take up a pen and piece of paper and a stamp, and write a note to a teacher, a friend, a loved one, someone sick, or someone lonely.

Give up TV. And take up conversations. Take up stronger relationships. Take up the Bible. Take up prayer.

Give up oppression. Give up resentment. Give up fear. And take up justice. Take up reconciliation. Take up love.” What will you give up and what will you take up this Lent?

Some of you may remember the story of Helen of Troy. According to legend this beautiful queen was captured and carried away and became a victim of amnesia. She became a prostitute in the streets. She didn't know her name or the fact that she came from royal blood.

But back in her homeland, friends didn't give up hope for her return. An old friend believed she was alive and went to look for her. One day while wondering through the streets, he came to a waterfront and saw a woman in tattered clothes with deep lines across her face. There was something about her that seemed familiar, so he walked up to her and said, what is your name?

She gave a name that was meaningless to him. Then he said, May I see your hands? She held her hands out in front of her, and the young man said, You are Helen! You are Helen! Do you remember? The fog in her mind seemed to clear as she looked up at him in astonishment. She had discovered her lost self, and she put her arms around him and began to weep. She discarded the tattered clothes and once more became the queen she was born to be.

Maybe that's a good image of Lent. We find ourselves spiritually wandering away from home, not being who God created us to be. These forty days can be a time of removing those tattered clothes that we have put on and realizing who God has made us to be.

Paul uses this image in our second reading from Colossians. He says, like old clothes, strip off “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self.” And then he says, “Clothe yourselves with these things- compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Maybe you want to keep this bulletin by your nightstand and check that list before you go to bed. What could we have done better today?

For the next five Wednesdays, we'll talk about what life in Christian community looks like, how we can build each other up, how we can forgive each other when we blow it, how we can reconcile with each other so that we can move forward together. At noon I'll have an abbreviated version, and then in the evening at St. Paul's we'll be able to have some discussion. On Sunday morning, we'll be discussing some spiritual practices, spiritual exercises, that can help us be aware of God's presence.

Some of us know about physical therapy. I am going to get some more physical therapy for my arms, because I overdid it in trying to get stronger after some surgery last year.

Maybe pain is a helpful diagnostic tool for Lent. Where is there emotional pain in my life? And if another person comes to mind, maybe the question is, Why is there pain there? Am I bitter? Resentful? Angry with somebody? Unforgiving? Is there pain in my life from long ago, and it's time to forgive somebody and move on, because the only way that person can continue to hurt me is if I won't let it go.

God wants us to grow! God wants us to move beyond the memories that have crippled us. God wants us to stretch our capacity for trust. God wants us to move beyond feelings of low self-worth, because we are created in God's image, with unique gifts, and nobody else can do the exact job God wants us to do. Now, let me say this is God's work in us. Paul says on Romans 12: Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, not transform yourselves. God does the work. And we can place ourselves in position as we use the spiritual practices for God to do the work.

I read an obituary for Barbara Harrison a while back. She was a writer and reviewer, and she was known as a gifted interviewer. Somebody once asked her secret for interviewing. She said that the first step was exhaustively researching her subject. But the challenge beyond that, she said, is to pay absolute attention when you're with that person. She said, Usually when I interview, the person I'm interviewing is the most interesting person in the world to me at that moment. That to me is a great picture of God who walks with us on this journey. God pays absolute attention to us. God looks into our eyes, and says:

You are my beloved. With you I am well-pleased. And then God says, Turn your attention back to me. I have so much more I want to show you. Turn

your attention to me in prayer. Turn your attention to me by giving up something that might control you. Turn your attention to me as you give of yourself and your treasure to those in need.

The writer Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests that Lent is not about self-denial, it's about relinquishment. It's about letting go. Maybe that's a more helpful way to frame some of our spiritual tools during Lent. We're going to let go of some things. We're going to relinquish some things that have a hold on us, by the grace and power of God.

Out in the narthex, I have some devotional booklets, as well as a sheet that has five things to add and five things to let go of during Lent. If any of these seem helpful, use them or adapt them. If they aren't useful for you, let them go and come up with your own list.

So who needs Lent? I believe we all do. There's a scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where the hobbits Frodo and Sam are leaving The Shire, the home they've always known. At one point Sam stops suddenly, and says, If I take one more step, I will be in territory in which I've never been. He then joyfully takes that step, and it changes his life in ways that he couldn't have imagined.

I pray that you and I will take a step into uncharted territory this Lent, that we will discover new life in Christ that will transform us. Welcome to our Lenten journey. Amen.